

Book Review

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Patrick Baert, **The Existentialist Moment: The Rise of Sartre as a Public Intellectual**,
Cambridge: Polity Press, 2015, 240 pp.

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This book provides a comprehensive and historically rich account of the sudden rise of Jean-Paul Sartre (1905–1980) as a public intellectual in France in the mid-1940s. Written by Patrick Baert, Professor of Social Theory at Cambridge, the case of Sartre is in fact but an application of a new sociological theory of intellectuals that revolves around notions of positioning, networks and conflict. This theory is the subject of the last two chapters and can be read separately from the others.

By “positioning”, Baert means the process by which certain features are attributed to an individual or a group. Intellectual interventions, whether through writing or speaking, always involve positioning. Positioning, in turn, is not a one-off event but an ongoing process that involves more or less complex intellectual and political networks. Team membership is crucial, Baert notes, because positioning rarely goes uncontested. Intellectuals might be able to position themselves positively and effectively for a certain period of time, but eventually rival intellectuals will challenge them, portraying them as out-dated, insignificant or outright erroneous. Sartre’s case is a good illustration of this as, from early on, he was the subject of criticism from various quarters and struggled to shed accusations of being either a bourgeois thinker or a nihilist.

The main focus of the book, however, is not on Sartre’s demise but on his ascent to stardom. In five detailed chapters, Baert discusses Sartre’s intellectual interventions, the network of friends and colleagues in which he operated and the broader context of France in the mid-1940s to explain the origins of “the existentialist moment”.

The first chapter presents a useful overview of the period of the German occupation of France, between 1940 and mid-1944. Baert focuses upon how the occupation and collaboration affected the French cultural scene, deepening existing cleavages within the intellectual community.

The second chapter looks at the debates around the trials of collaborators, following the decree of 30 May 1944 that stipulated that writers and artists who had collaborated with the enemy would be purged. These trials triggered immense media interest. The most controversial trial was that of Robert Brasillach, the editor of the fascist *Je suis partout*. The trial took only one afternoon – 19 January 1945 – and resulted in Brasillach’s guilty verdict and eventual execution. Baert interprets this purge as an attempt by French society to come to terms with the cultural trauma of the occupation: writers were the object of exemplary punishment given the mythological status that literature had for the French cultural establishment.

The third chapter discusses the intellectual debates around the purge, in which the notion of responsibility became central to the vocabulary used by former Resistance intellectuals to express the trauma of the war. This is also the period when, between the autumn of 1944 and the summer of 1945, Sartre began

to position himself as an authoritative public intellectual. A case in point is “La République du silence”, first published in September 1944. In this piece Sartre discusses silence in the context of the German occupation to make two different points. The first is that silence can be something imposed on people. Being silenced, however, makes one conscious of the power of words. The second point Sartre makes is that silence can also be a form of assertion – an heroic act of resistance against the oppressor.

The fourth chapter addresses the events that took place in the autumn of 1945, the period in which existentialism became a highly publicized philosophical movement and Sartre its most celebrated spokesperson. Whilst only a year had passed since the publication of “La République du silence”, the meaning of silence had changed dramatically. Now silence was increasingly seen as a cowardly act, a failure to speak out and take the responsibility that is bestowed upon us. Ironically, as Baert emphasizes, intellectuals such as Sartre seem to have decided that they had the responsibility to speak out precisely at the moment when it had become safe to do so. Furthermore, the collective silence of France under the occupation may explain why so many people were receptive to Sartre’s message of political commitment and responsibility: it is as if, Baert suggests, the cult of the engaged intellectual would help exorcise a shameful past.

The fifth chapter deals with Sartre’s attempt to consolidate and strengthen his position as a public intellectual between 1946 and 1947. Crucial in this regard is *Réflexions sur la question juive*, where Sartre uses existentialist concepts such as choice, authenticity, inauthenticity and bad faith to analyse anti-Semitism. Each of its four chapters presents a psychological ideal-type: the anti-Semite; the democrat; the inauthentic Jew (i.e. Jews who, in an act of “bad faith”, seek to integrate at the cost of losing their original identity) and the authentic Jew, inspired by the figure of Raymond Aron, which signifies “choosing” oneself as a Jew.

Written in an accessible and jargon-free style, this book is much more than a mere historical reconstruction of the early days of existentialism in France. It offers a historically sensitive application of a new sociological approach to intellectual life. In this sense, *The Existentialist Moment* is an important and timely contribution to the burgeoning field of the sociology of intellectuals. It has relatively less to say, however, about Sartre’s ideas themselves, both regarding their internal philosophical consistency and their possible uses today. A second, related point is that future applications of positioning theory might benefit from extending the analysis to longer time periods with the aim of examining how intellectual interventions by the likes of Sartre often stand for remarkably different political and disciplinary projects in different contexts. Such a variation, I suspect, has as much to do with intellectuals’ positioning in their lifetimes as it does with debates over the meaning of their work by subsequent generations for different political and disciplinary projects.